


Why I Give Students Only One Chance on Tests

By Baptiste Delvallé

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Editor's note: For a counterpoint to this piece, see Lisa Westman's opinion essay, "*Retakes Do Not Promote Laziness. They Exemplify Compassion.*"

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In my world language and social studies classes, I have a long-standing policy that some might find harsh: I don't allow students to retake quizzes and tests. I believe in preparing students to be ready the first time. I believe in teaching them skills and *rigor*.

Here's how I explain it to my students. If you're asked to meet a deadline in a future job, and you're late or have poor-quality work, you might get fired. If you're in a relationship and don't show up to the dates, you might get dumped. If you cross the road without looking, and a car comes zooming by, you don't get a second chance. I prefer that they get a bad grade and learn to give it their best shot on the first try, rather than to hear years from now that they're still struggling.

I was partially schooled in France, where retaking tests is unheard of. When I first came to the United States, I appreciated empathetic teachers, but realized that second chances were automatically granted to students instead of being the exception, and that for most students, it meant they didn't need to do their best the first time. The more I teach, the more I confirm that my position makes students better learners.

Expectations for Effort

When I started working at a new middle school two years ago, I explained my philosophy to my students. They all complained, as students usually do when I go over this, and many failed the first vocabulary quiz. They felt it was unjust that I did not allow them a retake. My co-workers also resisted my philosophy, telling me it wasn't fair to expect success the first time. They felt I didn't value progress and trial and error. They said I should let students master the content at their own pace.

But what I expect is not success the first time. I expect students to put in effort the first time and constantly think about ways they can work to improve. And I don't just set the policy and allow students to fend for themselves. I walk them through better ways to prepare for tests.

I know what many teachers might be wondering: All students respond to tests differently. How is this fair to students who have test anxiety or other learning struggles that make testing difficult?

Our job is to push students to challenge themselves and surpass their own expectations. While we should treat all students with empathy, allowing students to retake tests puts the focus on the content—not the useful life skills necessary to pass a test, including memorization, recall, and stress control. Having one chance pushes students to master both content and skills.

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Three months in, students began to thank me. What changed?

Student Techniques for Success

After that first fateful quiz, we had a whole lesson about how to prepare for tests, using what I call the "What Works Well" technique. I put three big pieces of paper around the room and asked students the following questions: What works well for you to memorize information at home, to recall information the day of the test, and to check a test before handing it in?

Then they shared their best techniques: One student puts a poster of the information he needs to know around his bedroom. When recalling facts the day of the test, another student shuts her eyes and imagines herself in the room where she first learned the information. While prepping might be intuitive to me as a teacher, students' suggestions speak to all learning styles.

Students continued to add to the posters as they thought of more solutions, and said the inspiration from their classmates sparked new test-taking techniques for them. Those who were already good test takers admitted the process took away their disdain, as they realized that the other students who were struggling weren't lazy, but simply needed guidance on how to proceed.

Another method I find works for students is keeping a test-taking and project-creating journal. For each test or project, students write an entry about the methods they use to accomplish quality work. After completion, they write another entry reflecting on what worked well in their method and what needs improvement. I regularly collect the journals and organize conferences with the students who still seem to struggle to find ways to improve.

Skill-Focused Education

When I meet with parents and students to showcase students' work from the term, we don't focus on the grades, but on the effort and methods students used to get those grades. We point out the progress. Many of my students say they went from feeling lost to feeling self-reflective and in a mindset to constantly improve their skills.

As for the content itself, students still have plenty of opportunities to master it. Even if a test is on five vocabulary words that are specific to a unit, it doesn't mean we will never use those words again once the test is over. Future assessments or projects allow us to see if students acquire the content after the original test they failed.

In the end, I don't think it matters if students don't remember how to say pumpkin in French, nor do I think it matters if they get Ds and Cs in my class. What I think really matters is that at the beginning of semester, they get Ds and Cs, and at the end, they get Bs and As. At the beginning, they do not know how to get Bs and As without having several chances. By the end, they know how to get those grades the first time.

If all teachers shifted from content-obsessed to skill-focused education, tests would become a useful way to practice skills, not a way to check facts. I believe we as teachers should give children the essential skills to be successful individuals. Harmless consequences for students, with lessons derived from those consequences, are much better than harmful consequences for the adults they will become.

*Baptiste Delvallé has been a middle and high school language and social studies teacher in the United States and abroad for six years. He has taught in French immersion schools in Minnesota and Oregon and created his own **language program**. He currently teaches at an international school in France.*

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